Art & Betty Shibayama

The Shibayama family in Peru

“In my case, they denied my citizenship because I didn’t have legal entry. Now, the government brought us here forcibly, on a U.S. army transport, put us in a justice department camp that was administered by the immigration. So, where’s the place where it says I’m illegal?"

Art Shibayama's childhood was idyllic. His summers were spent swimming off the coast of Callao, where his loving grandparents essentially raised him. Back in Lima, his father ran a successful business importing textiles and selling dress shirts for wholesale. His family had domestic workers to help with the house; chauffeurs to pick him and his siblings up from school; a beautiful house and a car. By any standards, Art's childhood was nearly perfect.

And then, America went to war with Japan. While the policies of the internment were taking hold along the West Coast of the U.S., Peru was hashing out its own sordid deal with the United States: Extradite the Japanese Peruvians as hostage bait for Americans in Japan. In exchange, the U.S. would continue its financial and military support of the country, keeping its interests in the Panama Canal safe. And similar to the palpable anti-Japanese sentiment along the West Coast, President Manuel Prado rode the wave of Peru's own prejudice, ridding the country of Japanese businesses and financial competition. In sum, both governments found great advantages to more or less kidnapping people from their homes.

Art, who was the oldest of six, would eventually be a key person in leading the fight for fair reparations for the Japanese Peruvians. Refusing to take the rather pathetic monetary sum of $5,000 from the U.S. government as an apology, Art has continued to speak out about this history and has continued to demand a fair acknowledgement from both governments that atrociously violated their civil rights.

Now at 85 years old, I spoke with Art Shibayama and his wife, Betty in their home in San Jose. Betty's own story about internment was also a fascinating piece that added to the mosaic of their relationship and marriage, where overlapping family experiences - tragedies - brought them into contact. Art is honored as one of the candle lighters, representing the Justice Department camps, at the yearly Day of Remembrance in San Francisco.

You can watch his documentary, *Hidden Internment,* here.

I've been looking forward to speaking with you now, as it's been a while since those first years of fighting for redress for the Japanese Peruvians. What, if anything, has changed for you? I wanted to know how your perspective changed.

Art Shibayama: The reason I went into the service is that I was fighting deportation and some people went to Japan and my dad didn't want to go to Japan, there wasn't enough food. So I figured, if I go into the army, there's less chance for deporting me.

Betty Shibayama: Because he was considered an enemy alien and he was fighting deportation and he couldn't return to Peru. Citizens could return but the parents couldn't. And he was a minor so, he wouldn't go back alone.

AS: I was in bad shape [*laughs*].

Well, that's what I was curious about. How could you even be drafted if you weren't a citizen? It doesn't make sense but also shows the injustice of the government.

AS: And usually if you get drafted, they give you citizenship, if anything. But in my case, they denied my citizenship because I didn't have legal entry. Now, the government brought us here forcibly, on the U.S. army transport, put us in a justice department camp that was administered by the immigration. So, where's the place where it says I'm illegal?

It was like you were without a nation.

BS: Yeah, at one point, he had no country. He was a man without a country.

If we were going to start with your childhood in Peru, what are some of the highlights of being young and growing up there?

AS: Going to school, playing sports.

BS: They were well-off. Because they had maids. And chauffeurs that drove them to school.

The Shibayama family at a park in Peru. From left to right: Tatsue (mother), Takeshi, Fusako, Akiko, Kikue, Kenichi, Art, and Yuzo (father) in front seat of car.

AS: We used to go to Japanese private school and they were teaching Spanish every other period. And the younger kids were small, so my father told my chauffeur to take us to school and pick us up.

That makes this even more tragic.

BS: Yeah. Because everything was taken away when he came to the U.S.

Your father wanted to go back to Peru but what kept him from going?

AS: The Peruvian government wouldn't take us. The only people that were allowed to go back were people that had Peruvian wives or Nisei wives, because Niseis were Peruvian. But if both parents were Issei, they wouldn't take us. Because actually, Peru wanted to get rid of all the Japanese. That's

why they were taking 2,600 [people] from 13 different countries. But out of the 2,600, 80% were from Peru. Because President Prado wanted to get rid of all of the Japanese.

BS: Because they were successful.

So they didn't have Peruvian citizenship. What about your grandparents?

AS: It didn't even matter because my grandfather had Peruvian citizenship but they still took him. And he was sent to Japan before the end of the war. So actually, if he was still in the U.S. after the war, he would've been able to go back because he was a Peruvian citizen but he was already in Japan. He wasn't voluntarily, he was forcibly sent.

And your grandparents just lived there for the rest of their lives?

BS: Yeah. He never saw them again after they were taken. Because he was the oldest in the family, and he was the first grandchild. So his grandparents had a shop in the port of Callao. [*To Art*] you actually lived with them, didn't you?

Art and his grandparents, Kinzo and Masae Ishibashi, in their shop in Callao.

AS: I lived with my grandparents before I started school. My parents were in Lima, and my grandparents were in Callao. I used to spend my summer vacations there because Lima doesn't have any water. Callao is the port for Lima actually. So I used to stay there and went swimming everyday in the ocean.

Did your grandfather go swimming too?

AS: Yeah, they went before they opened the store and I used to go with them, then come home and I eat breakfast, lunch. Then I used to go back again to the beach to meet my friends.

You were living the life. And so were your grandparents. Where in Japan were they from?

AS: Fukuoka. He had a brother in Japan but they never came.

BS: And his father's parents were gone.

AS: That's the reason he went to Peru because [his father] died when he was 15. And he went because he had an uncle in Peru.

That's hard to imagine that you never saw your grandparents again.

AS: I was almost closer to them than my own parents for a while. When I started kindergarten or first grade, we started playing baseball against the other classes. Naturally I needed a baseball glove so instead of asking my father I called my grandfather and told him. He came all the way from Callao to Lima and got me a glove and a bat.

He *was* your parent, they raised you. So when they left Peru, you were twelve by that time?

AS: Yeah.

What do you remember about them leaving?

AS: I don't even know when they were taken. I really don't remember anything. I was living in Lima and they were taken from Callao.

It's more heartbreaking to hear about all of these ways you were plucked from where you lived and how your family was scattered. And you've mentioned in many interviews that your father went into hiding right after the war started. What do you remember about that?

AS: When people found out that the U.S. army transport came into the port of Callao, word got around. So a lot of the head of the family went into hiding.

Where did they go?

AS: I don't know. But my father went near the mountains, near the Andes, because he had a friend up there.

BS: So he figured they wouldn't go looking for him.

AS: Yeah, by then, they took my mother and put her in jail. So then my younger sister, Fusa-san's godfather was a Peruvian, so he went and told my father what was happening. So he gave himself up.

BS: Yeah because they arrested the mother, and the sister right below [Art] was 11 years old, didn't want the mother to go to jail alone. So they were put in jail. And she told me that all she did all night long — because she was thrown in with prostitutes and thieves — all they did was hug each other and cry all night.

Do you know how long they were in jail?

AS: I think overnight or a couple of nights.

BS: I think Fusa told me that your father said that he would come out of hiding and if they could go as a family. They probably figured the more hostages the better.

Did your parents explain to you and your siblings what was happening? Did you ever understand that you were basically being kidnapped?

AS: No. You know how the Japanese— the old Japanese parents are. They don't communicate with their kids. It was the same with my dad.

Were you scared, or did you feel like something bad was happening?

AS: No, because we were all together.

Some other people have said the same thing, they didn't remember it being scary. It was only after the fact that they understood what their parents went through. Betty, what was your experience like?

BS: Well, I lived on a farm in Oregon. And I was the youngest of eight kids. So late at night after Pearl Harbor, my parents thought all the kids were sleeping. I couldn't go to sleep but I heard my parents talking to my oldest

sister and oldest brother. They said that because they're not citizens, they might be sent back to Japan. So they told the oldest two that they would be responsible for the rest of the family. And when I heard that I just couldn't imagine life without my parents. So I just dreaded what was going to happen. And when we found out that we were going as a family I was so happy, I didn't care where we were going, as long as we were going as a family. Thinking you were going to be separated from your parents but you get to go as a unit, I'll go anywhere they go.

You thought it was going to be much worse, that you'd be separated.

BS: People ask me, 'Weren't you scared when you got on the train?' And I say no, I was happy. I didn't care where we were going, as long as we were going with my parents.

What city did you grow up in?

BS: It was a town, Hood River. It was about 50 miles east of Portland, along the Columbia River. Beautiful country there. It's like, what they say, like redneck country [*laughs*]. Well, they wanted to get rid of the Japanese, right? But our neighbors —I only found this out recently from one of my brothers — when the evacuation notice came out, our neighbor who maybe lived a mile away from us had told my father, 'Don't report for the evacuation.' Because he was a hunter and a fisherman, and he would go in the mountains and he says, I know where I can hide you. And he said, 'They won't find you.' And he would provide food and shelter and he said, 'Don't go, don't go.' But my dad said, 'I can't expect someone to do that.' And our family was so huge. I mean he really appreciated that offer. He was really a good friend. So there were a lot of people that wanted to get rid of us but then there were good friends.

Did that neighbor offer to keep your house for you?

BS: Well, it was leased. But our possessions, I don't know where my father put them, we must've put it in storage. I don't know where they stored it. Because he went back. While we were in camp, he went out to work. My father said he didn't decide whether to go back to Oregon because people

who went back said there was so much prejudice. And so my two older sisters had moved to Chicago because there were jobs out there and they were hired as housemaids. And my two older sisters said, "Why don't you just move to Chicago and forget about Oregon and start a new life?" And that's why my dad went to check Hood River before. And when he went into town, he went into a restaurant during lunch. And they wouldn't serve him. And he tried a few places that said "No Japs." So then my best friend's aunt had an electric store in town and she was friends with my dad. And so my dad went in there and he was visiting with her. And she says, "By the way did you have lunch?" And he says, "No, I couldn't be served." And she told him to stay there and she went and got food for him.

And she was *hakujin*?

BS: Yes, she was. And there were some Japanese Americans who were in the 442, and from Hood River. There was one that went to visit his family and he had his uniform on and he stopped to eat at a restaurant. And anything he ordered, they said they don't have. So he saw some guys drinking beer — he didn't drink beer but he ordered a beer — and they said they don't have any. And he said, 'How come you served them beer?' The guy said, 'Didn't you see the sign when you came in? We don't serve Japs.' And he had his uniform on. That's how bad it was. And a friend of my sister's, one of her best friends, wouldn't even talk to her. I said, what a friend. That's not a friend.

Well it shows also that it's the parents that instill that in the kids. How did your family end up in Tule Lake?

BS: From Oregon my father saw in the paper that people of Portland are being sent to the fairgrounds, stockyards or whatever. Well they sent us all the way down to Fresno, I think for three months. The camp wasn't even ready. My brother said we were living in tents and it was *hot*. We had to stand in these lines for the mess hall in the heat, and a lot of the Issei women standing in line would faint. I'd stand in line with my mother and I'd think, please don't faint.

We were there for about three months and then they sent us to Tule Lake, and they had the so-called loyalty test. And I guess they considered my father loyal. So after Tule Lake became a segregated camp, we were sent to Minidoka. They were supposed to have sent us to Heart Mountain but then my Dad said he wanted to go back to Oregon and since Idaho was closer to Oregon than Wyoming, we went to Minidoka.

What do you remember about the food?

AS: We had it better than them because we didn't go to a mess hall, we cooked at home. According to the size of the family, they gave us a kerosene stove and an ice box. And we would go to the market. And we used to get a quart of milk for each kid a day.

Wow, that's a lot, right?

AS: Oh yeah. And in those days, the cream used to float, rise to the top. So when it was a birthday my mother used to ask for extra milk because it was delivered by the internees. And extra ice. So my mother used to make ice cream from that cream.

BS: His mother was a good cook and I'm sure she made substitutions. There [at Crystal City] you eat together as a family. But in camp my brother said he'd roam and go to different mess halls and find out which one had the best cook and they'd go eat there.

Do you remember anything specific you would have to eat a lot?

BS: Well, my father and the men would say they're feeding us horse meat, there was something that was dark and it wasn't beef, you *know* it wasn't beef. And the men would say, 'They're feeding us horse meat.' I'm trying to think what else. You know the kids get hungry, what can you get? Well there was always extra bread. And we'd take the bread but there was no peanut butter and jelly, so we'd get the Mayonnaise and then we'd have lettuce and that was it. We'd have a lettuce sandwich. I remember we'd be eating that as a snack [*laughs*].

AS: But compared to them, a couple of my buddies used to work at the market. They used to bring home peanut butter, loaf of bread, jelly. And then another thing is, we used to have a grapefruit and orange orchard inside the camp. So on the way to school, we'd walk around the outside and we'd see where the ripe ones are and at night we used to sneak in there and pick them. We could get them at the market but somehow this one tastes better. To make it worse, my father was a policeman [*laughs*].

When you went to Seabrook [New Jersey] did you experience any prejudice?

AS: No, there wasn't much prejudice on the East Coast.

BS: Because in California there were a lot of Japanese. But Fusa, his sister, told me that when they went to Seabrook it was mostly Japanese anyway, but it was mostly Japanese Americans. She felt kind of alienated because they hardly spoke English, right?

AS: We didn't speak English.

BS: Right, they spoke Spanish, and then they spoke perfect Japanese. Not like the Japanese *we* spoke. That's why she said they were treated differently, because they were dark and she said she was treated differently.

AS: We were the last ones that went to Seabrook, it was like camp. All Peruvians were put together, and one Peruvian guy had a bad reputation. But I made the Seabrook Farm [baseball] team and after that, everything cooled off. I was the only Peruvian on the team.

BS: They were all Japanese American.

AS: We had a couple of kibeis who were in Crystal City. But most were JA's.

Do you still speak Japanese?

AS: Not as good. We went to Japan for vacation for five weeks. And only one of my relatives spoke English. So I was forced to speak Japanese everyday so it came easier. But now I only use it once a week, twice a week, so you

forget it.

How about Spanish?

AS: Same thing, Spanish. When I was in the service I went to Spain on furlough. I went with an Italian guy. And they're all looking at him, the Italian guy, and I started talking and they're looking at me [*laughs*]. And this is in the '50s!

It was fun to watch your documentary and see all of those Japanese Peruvians speaking Spanish. It just shows how people ended up everywhere. So how did you finally get your citizenship?

AS: When I was in the service, I was a clerical typist. We used to do all the paperwork for the European command. So one day, our section leader was a lawyer and knows Army regulation inside and out. He comes to me and says, 'Hey, Art! How come you're not a citizen?' So I told him what happened. And he says, 'Oh, I'll get you one!' So the paper went to Washington, came back, and said I was denied because I didn't have a legal entry. He got kind of messed up, too [*laughs*]. So he asked me what happened and I told him my story, and he says, that's kind of funny.

BS: See because after he was discharged, he reported to the immigration in Chicago and he said they had to study his case because they never had a case like his before. So it took about a year for them to get back to him and when they called him, they told him he had to go to Canada with a letter. To Windsor county, he had to cross over with this letter and then you come back and that's where he got his permanent residency. And that was 1956, so that's why he was denied redress because you had to have been a citizen or permanent citizen at the time of internment. So that's why he was denied. Isn't that ridiculous?

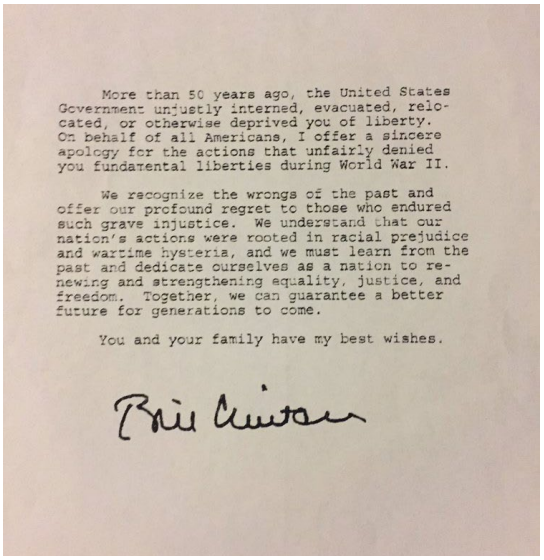
You couldn't make it up if you tried. And in the film, the redress was kind of an insulting amount, right? Which you denied?

AS: Not even that but the letter of apology. Betty's has a letterhead.

BS: Have you seen the one they got?

No, I haven't.

BS: There's no letterhead or anything, and it doesn't even mention Japanese or Peruvians, I'll show you.



More than 50 years ago, the United States Government unjustly interned, evacuated, relocated, or otherwise deprived you of liberty. On behalf of all Americans, I offer a sincere apology for the actions that unfairly denied you fundamental liberties during World War II.

We recognize the wrongs of the past and offer our profound regret to those who endured such grave injustice. We understand that our nation's actions were rooted in racial prejudice and wartime hysteria, and we must learn from the past and dedicate ourselves as a nation to renewing and strengthening equality, justice, and freedom. Together, we can guarantee a better future for generations to come.

You and your family have my best wishes.

Bill Clinton

Letter to the Japanese Peruvians

AS: It was like they could give it to anybody.

BS: See, there's no letterhead. Yeah, it doesn't even say. 'You and your family.' At least Bush said 'sincerely.'

This could've been for anybody.

BS: It's an insult. So his two brothers sided with him but he had two sisters who were living who accepted it [the $5,000 redress].

AS: But my mother and one of my sisters received the $20,000.

How did that happen?

AS: I don't know. They made a boo-boo somewhere [*laughs*].

BS: No it's because you know the Japanese war brides? They used to have naturalization classes in Chicago, and she used to go. And it's through that process they got their citizenship without going to Canada. And because of that they were able to receive redress. But because they went across the border, came back, you do what you're told to do [*laughs*].

AS: I asked a lawyer why my sister got it. And they said each case is handled differently.

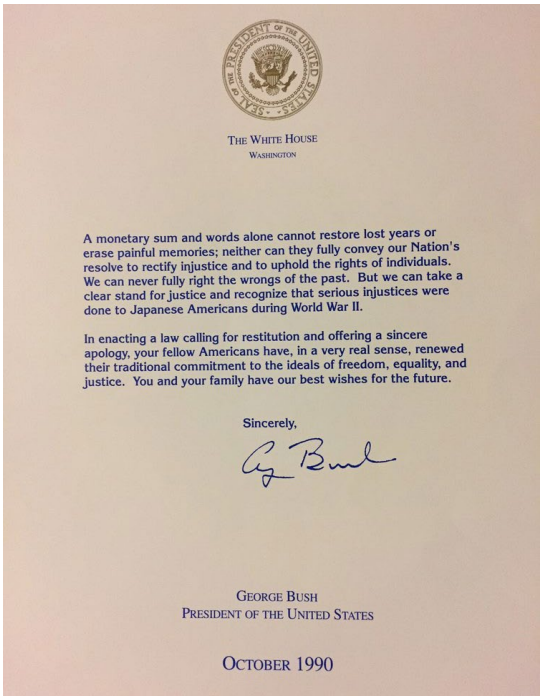
Art, you seemed to get the worst end of the deal.

BS: Yep. And they're just waiting for people to die off so they don't ask.

And how many Peruvians were there?

AS: 1,800 total.

You'd think one of the governments could afford to pay up. Do you know how many Peruvians did accept the $5,000?



THE WHITE HOUSE
WASHINGTON

A monetary sum and words alone cannot restore lost years or erase painful memories; neither can they fully convey our Nation's resolve to rectify injustice and to uphold the rights of individuals. We can never fully right the wrongs of the past. But we can take a clear stand for justice and recognize that serious injustices were done to Japanese Americans during World War II.

In enacting a law calling for restitution and offering a sincere apology, your fellow Americans have, in a very real sense, renewed their traditional commitment to the ideals of freedom, equality, and justice. You and your family have our best wishes for the future.

Sincerely,

GEORGE BUSH
PRESIDENT OF THE UNITED STATES

OCTOBER 1990

Apology letter to Japanese Americans

AS: I think only 17 refused and the rest accepted, especially the people in Japan. Because Japanese don't sue the government. They were the first ones to accept it. At that time, Patsy Mink was helping us the most. And she really got upset when we accepted $5,000. She was going all the way but then she died, so.

And nothing came from Peru?

AS: Well, the Peruvian government donated land for the Japanese community. So the Japanese community built an Olympic sized pool and field and all of this stuff.

So what is the status of the group fighting for redress?

AS: We're supposed to have a meeting next year [2017]. But now that we have a new president, I don't know, that might go down the drain, too. Because we were supposed to have a senate hearing in February of 2002 but 9/11 happened, so the thing got moved and backed up. But Grace Shimizu is someone you should talk to, she's the one who's still working on this.

Do you personally feel like there's been any closure on what happened, or are there still so many loose ends?

AS: Well [Xavier] Becerra was helping us from the beginning. Patsy Mink and Becerra.

BS: And a Republican, Tom Campbell, called *us* and said, 'Is there anything I can do for you?' Because he knew about us from reading it in the paper. We didn't even approach Tom Campbell. He called us. But every time an event was going to happen that would be beneficial for the Peruvians, something came up.

So tell me how you two met.

BS: In Chicago. So we got married in '55. Actually he was still considered an illegal alien. A year later we went to Canada and he crossed over.

And where did you meet?

BS: It was a Friday night get together, it was like a social club. And so that's where I met him.

So you were in high school?

BS: Yes I was.

AS: I never saw high school.

That's right, you said you just went to work immediately?

AS: Yeah. When we got out of camp, there were six of us siblings and my mother was pregnant when we got out of camp. And my father, by being illegal, he had to pay 30% income tax out of his salary. And being illegal, he couldn't get government aid. My sister and I had to work.

And why the move to Chicago?

AS: Because he had friends. By then, we were in Seabrook for two and a half years, and by that point, he figured we're never going back to Peru.

Did you feel that your father was ever homesick for Peru? Did he ever talk about it?

AS: He would never talk about it. But he wanted to start something.

BS: Yeah because he was a successful businessman and he just lost everything and had to start all over. And he was a very proud man and — yeah, it was sad.

Yuzo and Tatsue Shibayama

It is very sad. What did he do in Chicago?

BS: Eventually he owned an apartment building but then he was working, too at American Carbon. And he worked at a punch press or something and

he was working nights, and falling asleep. [*To Art*] And he lost his thumb, right?

AS: [*Nods*]

BS: Yeah, you know when you're sleepy? I don't know how the thing works but he didn't move his hand fast enough and lost his thumb. It's sad because he was a very successful businessman.

Do you yourself have a feeling of loss for Peru?

AS: No. They had a reunion back in Peru and my sisters and them went. But I don't want to remember the old days, so I didn't go.

Because it would've been too hard or too sad?

Betty and Art on their wedding day

AS: Too sad, I think.

Do you feel that way, Betty, about being home in Hood River?

BS: Well, if it didn't happen, if we weren't evacuated, I wouldn't have never met Art. From Peru, to a little farm girl in Oregon, how would we meet, you know? [*laughs*] So I have no regrets.

What is the lesson here that everyone needs to remember?

AS: Like now, feels like same thing's happening. Especially with our new president. Like we never learned.

BS: Just because we look different doesn't mean we're the enemy, right? Got to get over the prejudices. You'd think we'd learn from the past but we don't. We seem to be committing it again.

On July 31, 2018, Art passed away. The Japanese American and Japanese Peruvian community lost an inspiring, incredibly generous soul.